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## What Does Difficulty Mean in the Writing Tutorial?

[Fall 2005 / Consulting](#)

*by John Blazina*

**The author discusses the kinds of difficulty we might encounter in a writing consultation.**



John Blazina in the Black Hills of Wales

One year I tutored a student almost weekly. K wrote with little understanding of her topics and less of English grammar. In our first session the following year, she told me that she was enrolled in two third-year Sociology courses and was under academic warning: she needed a C+ average to remain at York. She wanted help with an essay in her course kit that she had volunteered to summarize in a seminar, but then found she did not understand. It was written in fairly demanding sociological prose, and I found a more readable essay in the kit and recommended she change to it. Then I went back to the first essay to see what in particular she didn't understand. I asked her if she had looked up the word magnitude. "I don't have a dictionary," she said. "You have to buy a dictionary now, this minute," I said. (When students bring in an essay topic they haven't understood, because they haven't looked up key words, I assume panic. It doesn't occur to me they may not own a dictionary.) K did not return. During that last session what I wanted to say was "You have no chance of passing these courses;" instead I told her to get a dictionary. Did the difficulty lie in K or in me? Sometimes the student is recalcitrant, resistant, inadequate to the task. Sometimes the fault lies with us, tutors who make the process more difficult than it need be.

In the same year we (writing tutors in the [Centre for Academic Writing](#)) held three seminars on the subject of difficult students in the context of writing

tutorials. The questions asked were: What counts for you as a difficult student? How do you deal with them and with your response to them? In each session we found ourselves defining "difficult" and spinning into difficult tutors and the difficulties of the system. The consensus was that there are difficult students — those with considerably weak writing skills or with problems of attitude or self-worth, too little or too much — but also that much apparent difficulty stems from the inattention, inexperience, or misunderstanding of the tutor. It also became clear that talking about our experiences of difficulty was good for us. There are kinds of difficulty that are simply inherent in tutoring. Even our most typical tutorials can be impeded by students' desire for editing, their underdeveloped writing and critical skills, passivity, and encounters with writer's block. These typical difficulties become major ones, however, when students bring their personal problems to the tutorial.

On her first session with a tutor a student may say "Please proofread my paper." The desire for editing meets a corresponding inclination in tutors to reshape the student's prose into something acceptable. It's easier to edit than to deal with problems more intractable than syntax, problems of focus, for example, when the student has slipped away from the topic, or of logic, when there simply isn't any. Many of us admitted to doing some editing, but only (we added defensively) in order to teach some grammar and model the right way to proofread. "If I see improvement in big issues," one tutor said, "I'll edit." Other tutors spoke of "demanding students" who want us to "fix" their paper, who exhibit a "learned helplessness," or who express annoyance if their expectations are not fulfilled. One new tutor, responding to student expectations, was relieved to hear that she need not read over the entire paper in the hour. She felt anxiety, she said, as the hour expired, and there were still pages to read. The relevant strategy here is to read the paper quickly, if length allows, for general problems of structure and development (topic sentences on their own may reveal these), and only then move on to the sentence level. If students only want or require editing, because clarity is an issue, I will do two pages, ask them to do the next two, looking for similar problems, and then go over what they did or did not find. With students who make occasional mistakes, and in general with all students, the best advice is "Read your sentences aloud." The plodding ear can hear what the speeding eye overlooks.

**The consensus here is that even if the student is not up to some of the challenging aspects of university work, our job is to do what we can, and perhaps in the extreme case learn to say "I can't help you."**

There are students with poor writing skills or undeveloped critical skills who may be registered in courses with complex reading assignments. To some degree this is the typical first year student who comes to the Writing Centre. The typical tutorial becomes the difficult one when we are presented with garbled pages by students begging for help. Most of us have met students in this situation. One of my students, in her second year (and not ESL), had been asked to summarize and discuss an essay by T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and to decide whether two other authors, Hulme and Santayana, were as conservative as Eliot. She had several pages of rambling, hard-to-follow text in which the word "meteorocracy" occurred frequently. There was no sign that she had read and understood Eliot or the other authors. When I suggested that "meritocracy" or "mediocrity" might be the word she had in mind (had heard in a lecture) she guessed "mediocrity," but did not know

what it (or “conservative”) meant. I spent the hour trying to simplify the topic as much as possible (especially difficult with topics designed to show how clever the instructor is) and provide a structure for her next draft. Another student had been asked to write a paper on racism in the media, using concepts from the course lectures and from a collection of feminist theory. So far she had cobbled together three pages of unacknowledged quotations from the critics, sometimes merging, sometimes severing sentences she did not understand. Again, my job was to extricate two or three concepts she had grasped and show her how to apply these to a text. The consensus here is that even if the student is not up to some of the challenging aspects of university work, our job is to do what we can, and perhaps in the extreme case learn to say “I can’t help you.”

More often we will have to deal with students who are passive, who have not have developed an active response to problems of understanding or execution. Some will bring an essay topic with words they don’t understand and haven’t looked up in a dictionary. Some will return week after week with the same problems. They listen without entering into dialogue. Or they ask us to write down a comment or suggestion. There is a temptation among tutors to hold forth, when we happen to know something about the topic, brightly exhibiting our stifled expertise to a worshipful audience of one. This can, in moderation, be useful to the student, encouraging her to think aloud in response. This can also stifle the student. There is also a temptation to take control, tell the student what to do, revise the paper. This will produce adoring fans, not independent writers. Some students will unconsciously encourage us to take this role by expressing admiration. Others may try to manipulate us: one tutor described a student who worked hard at getting her to put a lot of energy into the project: “She wanted me to take responsibility for how well she had done on the assignments. She emphasized her imminent deadlines. Also, she wouldn’t leave.” The issue here was one of manners and boundaries. This student tried to undermine or at least ignore the implicit boundaries between tutor and student. There are times when it is necessary to be explicit about our own expectations and ground rules.

Students with some form of “writer’s block” are frequent enough to be typical. Often they’ve done some reading, taken notes, but “don’t know where to begin.” Such students may simply misunderstand the writing process, especially its initial messiness. They may think they need a thesis or a plan before they can begin writing, and for some of them it may be appropriate to work on these elements. Others are relieved to hear about “writer-based prose,” Linda Flower’s phrase for the distinction between writing at first only for oneself and subsequently writing the “reader-based prose” that takes one’s audience into account. Freed from the need to get it right the first time, many students begin to look forward to writing. I find it useful to ask students who still “can’t get started” to write an introductory paragraph during the session, which we can then appraise together.

### **We are not counselors, but we should make allowances for the strategies with which students respond to feelings of shame.**

There are typical and atypical forms of self-esteem. Even the mildest forms of egotism can impair the peaceful progress of a tutorial. More extreme forms of egotism may induce warfare. One student complained bitterly about Ds I could see were well deserved, telling me he was American and knew his rights and

would sue if his grades did not improve. I tried soothing his injured pride, without success, and eventually wrote a report for the committee that dismissed his complaint of anti-Semitism against his professor. Students also can display resistance, even hostility towards the tutor. The writing tutorial can be a very personal relationship, and we should keep in mind how potentially shaming the experience is for students told their work is inadequate. They may well respond defensively with shyness and discouragement or with inappropriate anger against their teachers or tutors. They may find it hard to listen to, or accept, criticisms and corrections. We are not counselors, but we should make allowances for the strategies with which students respond to feelings of shame. I find it useful to place their work in context. I tell them 3000 students come to the Writing Centre with similar problems. I suggest they notice how many students sit silently in class, afraid that they alone do not understand, afraid to speak lest they expose their stupidity.

When students are anxious or under stress (perhaps from family difficulties), they may be more interested in talking about their problems than the essay topic. There was some inconclusive discussion about the tutor's role here. Some tutors prefer to accede to the student's agenda, for a while, and advise counseling if that seems appropriate. Others prefer to reframe the session, tell the student we only deal with writing. Some students may be more seriously disturbed; a few tutors spoke of having been threatened. Some difficulties arise from gender. The best advice here is to leave the office, report the problem to the director, or call security.

There are times when the difficulty lies not with the student or tutor but with the professor or the system. For instance, the essay topic is poorly constructed, vaguely explained, or lacking entirely: some instructors tell students to concoct their own. Or a grade may strike us as unfair. When students complain about grades we can see are justified, and we confirm the grade with precise explanations of the essay's problems, they usually, if grudgingly, demur. When the grade seems unjustified, we can advise the student to approach the instructor and ask for a rewrite or reconsideration. We can make the student aware of her rights. We can try to boost her morale, focus on the next essay. We can try not to criticize the instructor, difficult as it may be not to voice our feelings. The problem here is partly systemic: not enough time, too many students in a class, unrealistic reading lists, inadequate faculty. These problems are beyond our scope.

**Our problems often arise from our own inexperience and error. . . . [W]e resort too easily and frequently to "strategies" that scarcely rise beyond cliché.**

For almost an hour we are alone, warts and all, with a student who has come to us for help. There are difficult tutors, tutors whose own egotism creates problems, as well as tutors responsible (on occasion and by mistake) for difficulty. Very difficult students are rare. Our problems often arise from our own inexperience and error. We expect too much or too little from the student; we are inattentive or thoughtless; we resort too easily and frequently to "strategies" that scarcely rise beyond cliché. We should also be aware of our own proneness to shame. We too may fear incompetence or failure, have sessions with students with whom we cannot but fail. I was present when a tutor speaking with insufficient tact about a student's misunderstanding of the topic drove her to tears. I made a similar mistake myself. The student had the topic and an article on immigration and said she needed guidance. When I

asked what she meant by guidance, she was vague, halting in her speech. When I asked what she had done so far and she said "Nothing," I told her, brusquely, that it was important to do some work first, then come in. I went over the topic with her, asking if she knew where to find the "proposed changes" to Canada's immigration act. She said no. Had she consulted her instructor? No. I advised her to go to her instructor and to the reference desk in the library. She began to cry as she got up to go. I asked her to stay and found out that she had a disability (a childhood stroke, difficulty reading and writing) and worked with a syntax tutor and a content tutor. In tears she told me that, unlike everyone else, everything was hard for her. Mortified at my initial brusqueness, I talked about her strength, how much I admired her, and about the myth that everyone else was fine. The difficulty here was mutually constructed, I think; she didn't contextualize, I wasn't observant.

We all make mistakes, lack appropriate strategies, and need to admit our own need to learn. Our own institutionalized shame - we are merely writing instructors hired to deal with the mess beneath the notice of tenured elites (Hjortshoj 492) - should not lead to careless, hasty, or indifferent tutoring. Nor should we hide our frustration and failure from ourselves and others. One tutor spoke of how helpful it was to know others have problems. Perhaps the most emphatic lesson of the seminars is that we should consult one another as much as possible.

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